

Want to Smoke? Go to Hamburg

By Joe Jackson
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LYON, France -- I never thought I'd say this, but I'm thinking of leaving New York for a city that's free and tolerant and treats me like an adult. Berlin, maybe, or Barcelona, or even London, the city I left nearly 20 years ago.

I came to live in New York to be a musician and a bohemian, but the last time my band played in the city, in April, there were no fewer than five "No Smoking" signs in our dressing room. Two weeks later in Hamburg, Germany, our dressing room had five ashtrays. You can guess where we felt more welcome.

New York used to have an edge -- that sense that something thrilling can happen at any moment and that anyone, not just rich people and tourists, can be a part of it. Now even the bohemians are turning sanctimonious. Singers I know, who got through 20 years of smoky gigs, have become overnight converts to the total smoking ban in New York (though they don't complain about the smoke when they're in Europe). Can't we just be grown up? Besides, a bit of haze in the air makes the lights look better.

The smoking ban is just one part of the strangulation of New York's night life -- a crackdown on everything from topless bars to noise -- which began under Rudolph Giuliani and has continued under Mayor Michael Bloomberg. Many of us preferred the old X-rated Times Square to the new "Disneyfied" version. Besides, shouldn't a great city be able to tolerate a red-light district?

Nightclubs and bars can't allow their patrons to dance unless they have an expensive, hard-to-obtain cabaret license; clubs are closed if even one customer is found using drugs; and rich condominium owners who move into neighborhoods made fashionable by trendy clubs go to court to complain about the noise.

But the smoking ban is the last straw, the thing that has me packing my bags in utter disgust. And the new state law that is going into effect in July is even more draconian. What exactly is the problem with separate, enclosed, ventilated smoking areas?

I like a couple of cigarettes or a cigar with a drink, and like many other people, I only smoke in bars or nightclubs. Now I can't go to any of my old haunts. Bartenders who were friends have turned into cops, forcing me outside to shiver in the cold and curse under my breath (the bar can also be fined if I make too much noise). I go back inside to find my drink gone, along with my place at the bar. It's no fun. Smokers are being demonized and victimized all out of proportion.

"Get over it," say the anti-smokers. "You're the minority." I thought a great city was a place where all kinds of minorities could thrive. "The smoking ban works in Los Angeles," they say. But Los Angeles has a very different culture, not to mention more space and a better climate for outdoor smoking. "Smoking kills," they say. As an occasional smoker with otherwise healthy habits, I'll take my chances. Health consciousness is important but so are pleasure and freedom of choice.

As for secondhand smoke, there is research that shows it's not nearly as dangerous as some, like Mayor Bloomberg, would have us believe. And common sense tells you that a bit of smoke now and again, just when you're in a bar, isn't going to kill you -- especially if you're in a separate nonsmoking section.

There are ways to keep everyone happy. Make high-tech clean-air ventilation units, which are used in many pubs in London, compulsory; they really do suck out most of the smoke from the air. Have separate smoking rooms. Have separate smoking establishments. Stop putting unreasonable restrictions on smoking outdoors; if traffic fumes, garbage trucks, panhandlers and who knows what else can't spoil a tough New Yorker's al fresco supper, surely we can handle a bit of cigarette smoke.

Let employees who smoke, or are prepared to sign some sort of waiver, work the smoking venues. Have smoke-free serving areas and let patrons carry their own drinks into smoking areas. Keep the ban but allow people to apply for exemptions or smoking licenses. Limit the number of licenses so that plenty of places remain smoke free.

See how reasonable (or desperate) we smokers are? We just want somewhere to enjoy a legal product in a sociable environment. This can be resolved in a spirit of tolerance, which is increasingly rare in this increasingly joyless city. Bar and club operators should unite and lobby for fairer laws. Meanwhile, London is looking pretty good. Or Paris, or Moscow...

More about the smoking ban - <http://www.nycclash.com/>
Dancing in New York - <http://www.legalizedancingnyc.com/>